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Form, genre, voice, and authority in human geography: A speculative genealogy

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Abstract

This speculative genealogy of trends in the written forms of geographical scholarship, 2020-2043, explores the dramatic transformations in the discipline that came with a 'neo-formalist' turn towards critical reflection on and experiment with the formal aspects of geographical writing, including structure, genre, voice, and style. At the start of the 2020s, the forms, genres, and styles of academic geographical writing in Anglophone research journals were still rather homogeneous in form. Experiments with form were mostly restricted to sub-disciplinary silos. Following a series of important scholarly interventions, the discipline started to reflect more earnestly on the different kinds of authority that are claimed through the use of particular written forms and authorial personas. Whereas in the early decades of the 21st century, authorial personas were mostly confident, self-assured, decisive, and expressing a 'mastery' of concepts, the turn towards greater critical analysis of geography's written forms led to a proliferation of authorial personas, often rejecting personas associated with 'mastery' and instead exploring hesitation, anxiety, indecision, passivity, improvisation, unreliability, plurality, failure, humour, and self-deprecation, as ways of claiming different, more egalitarian forms of epistemic authority. This genealogy concludes that despite the problem of eclecticism, this turn towards greater methodological reflection on geography's written forms has greatly enriched the discipline from the mid-2020s until today.

Colleagues, thank you for this invitation to respond to Professor da Silva's keynote, 'Back to the Rough Ground: On the Virtues of Standardization in Geographical Writing'. Rather than directly responding to her critiques of the 'whimsical eclecticism' of contemporary geographical writing, I wish to offer a historical perspective, tracing a genealogy of geographical research over recent decades, and reassessing some of the innovations of this period. I focus on the period during the mid-2020s when the discipline started to shift towards a fuller engagement with the geographies of form, genre, voice, and authority. This was a period when critical reflection on the formal aspects of geographical writing – issues such as form, structure, genre, voice, and style – started to become accepted as central elements of research methodology. By the 2030s, research papers regularly reflected upon the form, voice, and style of geographical writing, and the lessons from this period have been well-learned today.

At the start of the 2020s, the forms, genres, and styles of academic geographical writing in prestigious Anglophone research journals were still rather homogeneous. Even when they argued for wildly different positions and politics, research articles tended to be *formally* very

similar to each other – using similar structure, style, form, authorial voice, and language. There was a widespread unwillingness in the discipline to seriously examine how geographical writing asserted, through its formal qualities, specific claims to epistemic authority. Many research papers advocated for radical, egalitarian ideals based upon plurality, multiplicity, and difference, yet they did so using written forms that reproduced the kinds of scientific writing that assert a claim to universality, objectivity, and value neutrality. Even articles writing for a radical multiplication or dispersion of authority could sometimes fall into using an authorial voice that was singular and masterful, using a structure that was linear and unitary.

It was in this context that a wave of new forms of creative expression started to be seen increasingly often in geography, from montage to geopoetics, from film to dance, from anonymous authorship to more-than-human co-writing (e.g. Magrane et al., 2019; Pred, 1995; Cresswell, 2019; Krupar, 2013; Olsson, 2007). Geographers started responding to appeals to ‘animate the adventure of writing, and of life itself’ (Dewsbury, 2014: 151). For a long time, however, such formal innovation was largely restricted to certain sub-disciplinary silos such as cultural geography, geohumanities, feminist geography, and postcolonial geography. It was only with the publication of such seminal texts as Garcia’s (2025) *Economic Geography*, Wang’s (2027) best-selling textbook, *Quantitative Methods: A Speculative Fiction* (currently in its 6th edition), and Singh’s (2028) *Surrealist Geomorphology*, that formal experimentation started to become more mainstream across the discipline.

A closely related trend in mid- to late-2020s geography was the important debates about the merits of different kinds of authorial personae that are used in geographical research. A touchstone for these debates was the work of sociologist Howard Becker, who decades earlier had called for closer attention to and reflection on the authorial personas used in academic writing. In a chapter titled, ‘Persona and Authority’, he observed that ‘everyone writes as someone, affects a character, adopts a persona who does the talking for them’ (Becker, 1986: 33). Yet in the first two decades of the 21st century, geographers seldom explained or justified their authorial personae, despite the central importance of voice for making their argument convincing or appealing. Nevertheless, many different personae were expressed in geographical research. Some writers relied on a voice that used complex language to make ideas seem clever and sophisticated. Others emphasized their esoteric expertise, writing as though their audience knew almost as much as they do about the topic, and offering a barrage of detailed knowledge that overwhelmed the reader into accepting their argument. Others invoked the participant-observer ‘I-was-there’ persona of what Clifford (1983) calls ‘experiential authority’: the appeal to unique experience born of the researcher’s insider status. Others filled their writing with technical language. Still others emphasized their similarity to ‘ordinary’ non-specialists, portraying themselves as ‘plain folks’ using plain language (Becker, 1986: 36). Each of these personae placed a demand on the reader to read and evaluate the text in a certain way. Each made a different claim to authority.

By the early-2020s, other authorial personas had become more common: the reflexive persona, sharing aspects of their own lives to establish rapport with the reader; the militant persona, grounding their authority in the strength of their convictions and the depth of their actions; the artist persona, grounding their text’s authority in creativity and imagination. Soon other authorial personae had become part of the established repertoire, many of them learning from feminist theory and postcolonial theory’s calls to undo the discourse and practice of ‘mastery’ (Singh, 2018; Nassar, 2021). Whereas previous decades had been dominated by the performance of authorial personas that were confident, self-assured, decisive, and expressing a ‘mastery’ of concepts, techniques, language, literatures, and data, new writing emerged that expressed ideas through authorial voices that embraced hesitation, anxiety, indecision, passivity, improvisation, unreliability, plurality, failure, humour, and self-deprecation. Of course, examples of such personas can be found in earlier work, but they only became

‘mainstreamed’ slowly over the course of the 2020s and early-2030s. Many of these authorial personae endure today; undergraduate methodology seminars are now scenes of passionate discussions about what kind of voice is appropriate for what kind of argument and subject matter. By the early-2030s, a culture of critical reflection on the authorial persona had become widespread. This can be seen in the inclusion of chapters on form, voice, and genre in the 8th edition of *Qualitative Research in Human Geography* (Pereira, 2031), as well as the increasing number of major research studies published in a wide variety of genres such as letters, stories, dialogues, speculative histories, manuals, manifestos, catalogues, diaries, social media feeds, and many more.

To understand the philosophical roots of this shift towards reconsidering geography’s forms, it may be helpful to recall Devi’s (2026) influential article, ‘A Neo-Formalist Turn in Geography? Pluralising Voice, Persona, and Authority in Geographical Scholarship’. This paper offered a contemporary reinterpretation of the relationship between spatial and aesthetic form, drawing on the work of early-20th century sociologist Georg Simmel and putting his work into dialogue with debates about realism and materialism in human geography that were common during this time. Simmel’s interactionist account of the social had emphasised that no thing or event has a fixed meaning; its meaning arises from interactions with other things and events (Levine, 1971). The conclusion that Simmel drew from this is that social analysis should not be overly fixated on the *contents* of things; instead, it must turn to more abstract socio-spatial *forms*, the stable outcomes of distances interposed between subject and object. Devi drew on Simmel to suggest that a true geographical realism is one that reveals the fullness of reality in every phenomenon, doing so neither through realist description nor through speculative theorisation, but through an attention to form that reveals the aesthetic dimensions of all spatial practices and interactions (see also De La Fuente, 2008). Her innovative reimagining of the nature of geographical critique responded to a widespread malaise about the possibilities of critique reimagined as a practice that succeeds in understanding the fullness of reality, not by describing it more vividly or theorising it with more sophistication, but by establishing a distance from it and transforming it. She tasked geography with transforming experiences of places instead of reflecting them, by tracing and expressing the forms that enable and constrain the meaning of specific spatial phenomena and practices. Such geographical neo-formalism, she suggested, can and should creatively transform or extend its object of analysis. Only by doing so can it achieve a genuine realism. Devi’s paper sparked a vigorous theoretical debate about the viability of the form/content distinction.

Critics of the neo-formalist turn argued that it presupposed an Aristotelian idea that any thing is a compound of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*), which are brought together in the act of its creation. This ‘hylomorphic’ model of creation supports a dualistic view where form (abstract, active, and mental) is imposed on a formless lump of material (concrete, passive, and inert). Here, form is what is actively imposed on inert matter. Yet in a series of key interventions, Martinez (2028, 2029a, 2029b) argued that thinking past this limited model should not lead to abandoning the concept of form, but instead to multiplying and pluralizing it, focusing on form-generating (‘morphogenetic’) processes rather than static forms (see also Ingold, 2013). Geographers influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, in particular, pointed out the radical approach taken to form in their work. Guattari’s (2013) *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, for example, based its ontology on the key premise that the world presents itself through a distinctive form, fluctuation: ‘there are Flows; the world presents itself in the form of fluctuation’ (Guattari, 2013: 75; see also Jellis et al., 2019). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s work, Martinez argued that approaching form as dynamic, variable, and differentiating can move geographical writing beyond a hylomorphic model of form, content, and expression. In particular, she argued for a need for a fuller formalist analysis of non-representational affects and sensations. Affects, she suggested, both take form and give form (see also Brinkema,

2014). As a number of geographical experiments in the early-2030s showed, aided by new publishing trends in transforming the possibilities and technologies of the monograph (Adema et al., 2022), approaching form in terms of a dynamic and differentiating process enabled fluid geographical forms that produced outputs that were dynamic and continuously adapting and transforming, through forms that were variously hybrid, experimental, continually evolving, collaborative, ‘living’, performative, ‘versioned’, and so on.

Despite the proliferation of experiments with form, voice, and genre in geography, there has been no shortage of dissenting voices. One of the most persuasive was Abubakar’s (2027) suggestion that recent work experimenting with form risked falling back onto the singular authority of ‘creativity’ or ‘imagination’. Creativity, he pointed out, recalling earlier debates about the co-option of creativity into neoliberal ideologies, has no kind of intrinsic positive authority: creativity can easily be tied up with structures of domination (Crang, 1992; Mould, 2018). After the wild abandon of the mid- to late-2020s experiments with form, by the 2030s geographers had started to cultivate more sober, cautious, and arguably more rigorous approaches to recalibrating geographical authority. More space was given to critical and philosophical reflection on how forms responded to changing political circumstances. Yet, as Professor da Silva remarked in her paper, this risks making geography self-absorbed, pretentious, and distracted from the serious problem of analysis, critique, and responding to overwhelming social, environmental, and political crises. What I hope to have shown in this genealogy of geographical aesthetics – following in the footsteps of Matless (1992) – is that the revival of interest in making analytical connections between spatial form and written form in the mid- to late-2020s marked a huge step forward for the discipline, transforming the subject in several ways: how methodology was theorised and justified, with writing becoming more fully recognised as an integral part of research methodology; in how epistemic authority was claimed and justified in ways that were more egalitarian and less tied to a patriarchal and colonial poetics of knowledge; and in how multiplying the styles, forms, and genres of geographical writing enabled geographical research to reach much wider audiences than it had previously.

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